

REFORM OF THE REGISTRATION SERVICE

PROGRAMME AREA RESPONSIBILITY: HUMAN RESOURCES AND CORPORATE SUPPORT SERVICES

CABINET

16TH DECEMBER, 2004

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To agree the approach required to ensure a successful transition of this service to the Council.

Key Decision

This is not a Key Decision.

Recommendations

THAT (a) To provide a single Herefordshire Registration District with a central office in Hereford City by means of a scheme change;

Subject to public consultation:

(b) continue to provide register offices at Leominster and Ross which will remain open as full time permanent outstations and be used with the Hereford office, as bases to provide a peripatetic registration service to the County;

and

(c) continue to use the existing Register offices at Kington, Bromyard and Ledbury as by appointment caller offices, with their marriage rooms re-designated as “approved premises” thus achieving a “five day a week” service in these areas.

Reasons

To continue to ensure excellent registration services to the public and seamless transition during the new legislative changes to registration services.

Considerations

1. National plans are now well advanced to modernise the Civil Registration Service in England and Wales. The vision is to transfer the historic service over time from a heavily regulated and labour intensive service, whose roots lie firmly back in the 1800's, to a dynamic, customer focused service fit to meet the needs of the population into the 21st Century.

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
Marie Rosenthal, County Secretary and Solicitor on (01432) 260200

2. Staff within the Herefordshire Registration Service have been monitoring these change proposals for some time with a view to ensuring that the Council is well placed to respond as and when the necessary statutory framework is put into place.
3. A draft Regulatory Reform Order (RRO) setting out proposals for reforming the registration of birth and death procedures, access to records and the organisation of the Registration Service within England and Wales has been placed before Parliament. When enacted later next year it will provide for the transfer of the existing Crown staff to the employment of the Council.
4. Parliamentary committees are considering two separate Regulatory Reform Orders. It is expected that part 1 of the Regulatory Reform Order (RRO), relating to the organisation of the local registration service and the registration of birth and death events, will reach the statute book in mid to late 2005 with reforms introduced early/late 2006. Implementation of this RRO will mean that births, deaths and still births are registered onto a central database rather than the current practice of recording details in a register. All certificates produced or future access to the information will be from this centrally held electronic record.
5. The Civil Partnership Bill is expected to become law in early 2005 with the introduction of interim arrangements for the taking of preliminaries and registration of Civil Partnerships from October 2005. It is intended that these events will also be recorded on a central national database. Over time the public will be able to access these systems direct.
6. The RRO part 2 relating to marriage aspects, while expected to be on the statute books by late 2005, is now likely to be delayed with reforms being introduced in the last half of 2006. Full implementation of the Civil Partnership proposals are likely to be introduced at the same time as the marriage reforms.
7. The postponement of the presentation of the RRO provisions relating to marriage will cause significant administrative problems because although staff will be local authority employees by September 2005 they will also remain Crown Servants appointed as Superintendent Registrars with current powers and responsibilities and duties required under the current legislation. This situation will exist until the second RRO for Marriages is approved by Parliament sometime in last half of 2006. This means we will need to phase the new arrangements over the next two years with the existing staff group.

Constraints

8. RRO1 and RRO2 are enabling legislation only, which will be brought into being by the Registrar General by Order. Proposed dates for implementation are therefore "not set in stone" and are likely to be moveable. The Service has to be ready to continue under the present rules and regulations yet be ready to comply with the new procedures when required by the Registrar General. However, the existing "technical" registration requirements and law will not change. The RRO assumes that parliamentary scrutiny will go "according to plan", however a general election held in 2005 could alter the proposed dates substantially.
9. The Council must consult regularly with its community on the services offered, delivery of modes, places and times that registration services will be available and the quality and level of service to be offered and on changes to those aspects. The Registrar General will issue guidance shortly on the form of consultation. Adequate consultation must be held prior to a scheme change. Once Cabinet have approved these proposals a consultation will take place.

10. Adequate accommodation must also be provided including interview rooms, marriage rooms and for the storage of and daily access to records etc.
11. The central database, to be established and controlled by the Registrar General, is key to these proposals and has to be in place before the RRO's can be brought into being. This aspect is still at an early stage.

Financial Implications

12. The Herefordshire Registration Service forms part of the County Secretary and Solicitor's Department. The Service is and will continue to be regulated by the Registrar General, although funded by the Council. In 2003/04, total expenditure was £312,339. Employee costs accounted for 63% of expenditure and the net cost of the service per head of population was 0.46pence. In recent years, annual income has increased year on year. Currently, there are 11 full time equivalent posts across the county. These employees will transfer to the Council in September 2005. It is expected that the income currently received across the Registration Service will fall once implementation of the National Review is fully complete. In that case, unless income from other sources has been identified, reductions in the current level of service would have to be considered. However, until the legislative framework and central database is fully in place, it is not possible to predict the financial implications for the Council. Certainly, there is sufficient funding to allow the service to continue at present service level for the next and possibly following financial years. The situation will be closely monitored and will be the subject of a further more detailed report once the statutory transfer is complete.

One District

13. The existing 6 Registration Districts for Births and Deaths will automatically be merged into one as part of the new proposals under the RRO. However Marriages will still retain existing District Boundaries until late 2006 or even later. If we retain the same structure as is currently in place i.e. 6 districts then we will need 6 SRs as each district requires a Superintendent Registrar (SR). If on the other hand a scheme change is implemented to amalgamate into one unified district, then only 1 SR need be appointed across the county supported by Deputy SRs. It is only following the implementation of RRO2 that district boundaries will no longer exist, as we know them now. Until then, people will have to continue to give notice to marry within the district in which they reside.
14. There are real operational advantages in moving to one district for marriages at the same time as RRO1 comes into being, especially involved with staffing. This can only be done by a Scheme change which is strongly recommended.

A Way Forward

15. These changes provide an opportunity to integrate some of the "front office" aspects of the service into the Info Service, as is already happening at Bromyard. Info Offices can also be used to carry out interviews. However, because of the expected delays and piecemeal introduction of the new legislation the Council will still have to continue to provide Register Offices, Marriage Rooms and adequate storage for records that require daily access.
16. It is proposed that the current Register Offices at Kington, Bromyard and Ledbury continue to provide local services by appointment pending the development of the Info Service across the county. The consultation exercise will seek views on the availability and range of services people require.

New Services

17. The new RRO will allow local authorities the power to provide new registration services as a way of maximising income. These will be developed in accordance with public consultation, a defined marketing strategy and plan in order to provide additional civil celebratory ceremonies, in particular civil baby naming, reaffirmation of vows, and possibly burial ceremonies.

Alternative Options

There are no viable alternative options.

Risk Management

The Council has a statutory duty to ensure that the service continues to be available throughout the transitional legislative period and beyond.

Consultees

Registration Officers are being consulted about these proposals. The public will need to be consulted before implementing any changes to the current levels of service.

Background Papers

None Identified